

# Supervisor/HR Supplement Newsletter

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*Helpful Resources From Your Employee Assistance Program*

## Be More Effective at Work: Develop Your Soft Skills



There is a straightforward strategy to increase your success at work (and in social life), and it involves developing your "soft skills." By soft skills, we mean the interpersonal, emotional, persuasion, and political skills that leaders use to communicate to help teams and organizations achieve goals.

**Develop Emotional Competencies.** First and foremost, many experts emphasized the importance of emotional skills and competencies (often referred to as "emotional intelligence") in the workplace. However, a great deal of emphasis was placed on using emotions appropriately. For example, it is important to be positive and upbeat as a manager or leader in order to motivate, but it needs to be realistic (not be an over-the-top cheerleader).

More important is the appropriate display of negative emotions. It is ok to show displeasure, disappointment, and even carefully controlled anger in the workplace, but the key is to turn these negative emotions into positive outcomes. For example, leaders are more effective if they convey their disappointment over a team or member's poor performance, but couple it with the message that "I know you can do better."

**Develop Political Skill.** Although the word "politics" suggests the sort of dirty politics that we all hate, it is important to be strategic and tactful in your behavior at work. Political skill involves using reciprocity effectively, for example, helping a coworker out, but being clear that help is expected in return. Regardless of where you work, it is important to figure out the "rules" by which the game is played and how to navigate around political barriers (and the negative political "animals" that reside in your workplace).

**Manage Your Impression.** Consider your image at work and what you want that image to convey to others. Psychologist Dana Carney presented her work on "power poses" that suggested that simply looking like you are powerful and "in charge" can not only convey a sense of power and confidence to others, but it can make you feel more powerful (and better about yourself). Reflect on the image that you convey to others verbally and (especially) nonverbally. Do you look confident and competent, or unsure and hesitant? Do you look and act like someone others want to work and partner with, or like the last person that someone would pick for their team?

**Avoid Death by PowerPoint.** Finally, leadership expert, Jay Conger, clearly demonstrated the role that memory plays in effective communication, suggesting that too many meetings and presentations at work are poorly done, or so packed with detailed information, that people come away remembering next to nothing. Conger emphasized the importance of coupling your message with clear imagery and examples, repetition, and focusing on a smaller number of key points (less than 6 or 7) in any presentation or meeting.

The one common message from all of the experts is that working on the development of your "soft skills" will make you a more effective leader and team member.

Published on February 28, 2012 by Ronald E. Riggio, Ph.D. in Cutting-Edge Leadership

Deer Oaks EAP Services, your Employee Assistance Program, is always available to you and your dependents. If you are struggling with children, finances, or just want some practical advice on health or the mind-body connection, contact Deer Oaks at:

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## Create a Better Workplace

We spend nearly a third of our life at work (including time thinking about or worrying about work). A wonderful workplace can enrich our lives, provide a sense of purpose, accomplishment, and a source for friendships and social connections. A terrible workplace can become a living hell, leading to stress, depression, and dissatisfaction.

It is important for businesses, large and small, to try to make the workplace as positive and as productive an environment as possible. Here are several suggestions on how to make your place of work better.

**Promote Regular Team-Building Activities.** The best places to work (think Google, Cisco and Whole Foods Market) have a shared commitment to the organization's purpose. At these companies, employees (who are often referred to as "team members") believe in the company and what they are doing and they support one another. To get that shared sense of purpose, it is important to focus on ways to build it. Some organizations have the resources to put on regular, consultant-assisted team building programs. But even small organizations that lack those resources can create team-building activities that can accomplish tasks while building that shared purpose and commitment.

For example, consider having all employees contribute to the creation of a company brochure or website. Such promotional materials for the company allow each member to focus on the organization's mission and purpose, and to focus on the "positives" associated with the company.

We have gotten the same effect by having all of our team members contribute to the writing of an annual report. It offers the opportunity for everyone to reflect on their personal accomplishments and learn about and celebrate the accomplishments of others, and turns an onerous task of "reporting," (formerly done by the executive team) into one of celebration and teamwork (Hint: This can be done on a wiki website!).

**Create a Culture of Mutual Respect.** A core value of every organization should be one of mutual respect and civility. Of course, this is easier said than done, but a starting point is to simply promote this value. Company leaders play a critical part in creating an atmosphere of respect and stopping instances of employee-to-employee (or supervisory) abuse.

My daughter's elementary school has done a wonderful job of this. They regularly discuss the value of mutual respect at assemblies. There are prominent signs that say: "No-Bully Zone," and a zero tolerance policy for bullying. [Note: Not simply a schoolyard phenomenon, workplace bullying is on the rise and an oft-ignored workplace problem].

**Develop Programs to Make Workplace Improvements.** Years ago, I worked with a large financial institution that had a biannual survey feedback program. All employees were surveyed about all aspects of their jobs, their departments, and their companies. Employees had the opportunity to identify problems or indicate where the company could do better. At an all-employee meeting, the areas of strength and weakness/problems were shared. The executive leadership team decided on 2-4 areas that needed attention and/or improvement. Employees from all levels then volunteered to serve on year-long task forces to target the problems. There was so much enthusiasm to serve that the number of volunteers far exceeded what was needed. As you can imagine, this company was an industry leader in employee satisfaction.

A common element of these workplace improvement programs is involving employees to help solve problems - doing it in a way that can both make the workplace better, but may also lead to productive outcomes for the organization.

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## *Ask Your EAP!*

The following are answers to common questions supervisors have related to their employees and making EAP referrals. As always, if you have specific questions about referring an employee or managing a workgroup issue, feel free to make a confidential call to the EAP for a management consultation.

- Q.** Do supervisors have any responsibility for helping employees manage anger in the workplace? Or is this a problem to address primarily by referring to the EAP? I see angry employees, and sometimes I step in
- A.** Witnessing displays of anger in the workplace is a common experience for supervisors. Although your employee assistance program is a key avenue of help for employees, your ability to properly intervene or positively influence angry employees is crucial. There is a financial and safety rationale for your role because it can prevent workplace altercations and conflicts that can lead to undesirable occurrences such as injuries, lawsuits, downtime, decline in morale, high turnover, and violence. Although you have no counseling role, you can practice effective communication with employees, understand and address their frustrations, empathize with their angry feelings, keep promises you make to them, and, of course, know when to make a referral to the EAP. As a person with authority, what you say can have a powerful effect. Don't minimize it. For example, say, "I understand your frustration" rather than "I am tired of hearing your gripes." Your EAP can help you acquire or improve upon these empathic and relational skills.
- Q.** It seems like bullies in the workplace have some type of power, even if only imagined. Is this correct? What's the supervisor's role in prevention? Would training for employees help reduce risk?
- A.** You're correct. Employees who bully often possess some degree of power—supervisory, tenure, delegated, indirect, or team leadership. Some bullies may perceive that or mistakenly believe they have power or authority, and this alone is enough to prompt their aggressive behavior. Obviously bullies can exist anywhere in the organization, so conducting general education and awareness is helpful. This should include self assessment for the potential perpetrator or victim. Throw in a zero-tolerance policy toward bullying and a significant reduction of the risk can be accomplished. Supervisors should be aware that a bully is often a trusted employee who is relied upon by the immediate supervisor for knowledge, expertise, and skills. He or she can be passionate and loyal to the organization. Nevertheless, if a supervisor becomes overly dependent on this "right-hand man/gal" relationship, bullying behaviors may emerge, aided by the protection or special relationship the bully feels exists with the supervisor.
- Q.** How can I hold employees accountable without making them feel that I am beating up on them or provoking them to get overly defensive?
- A.** Willingness to be personally accountable for one's life is learned, and it supports accountability in the workplace. However, you can have better success with holding employees to account if you have an effective relationship with them. Your view of accountability is important, so help your employees anticipate being held accountable. Always be sure there is no ambivalence about the results you expect. Some supervisors see accountability as a measure of "blameworthiness" when things go wrong. Do you approach your employees with this orientation? If so, you may also communicate less effectively and less frequently. Remember, you can make willingness to be accountable a performance measure. Then if issues remain, make a supervisor referral to the EAP.

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